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ABSTRACT

Provided in this report are (1) a discussion of the effects of historical events and linguistic complexities on elementary education in the People's Republic of China and (2) information on the Chinese educational system from early childhood education through the middle school (the equivalent of junior and senior high schools in the United States). A brief introduction gives an overview of China's history from 1949 to the present. The development of Mandarin as the national language and specific techniques used to teach reading and writing are also discussed. Statistics are given on the percentage of children in day care and on the success of the "one-child-per-family" policy. The goals and curricula of day care centers, nursery schools, and kindergartens are also briefly described. While most of the report is devoted to the primary schools (including discussion of structure, schedules, architecture, philosophy, curriculum, teaching methods, examination schedule, failure rate, and organization of schools and classrooms), some information is also given on special education and middle schools. The report concludes with a summary of the progress made in education in China over the last 35 years. (Author/CB)

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ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Ann E. Petri

ABSTRACT

This report reviews the effects of historical events and linguistic complexities on elementary education in the People's Republic of China, followed by a discussion of early childhood education, nursery school/kindergarten, primary school, middle school, and special education. Particular emphasis is placed on the areas of the basic structure, organization, curriculum, and methods of elementary school education.

INTRODUCTION

There are over a billion people living in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Historically it has been a country of extreme wealth and extreme poverty. Education was far from universal and very few peasants received any schooling at all. In 1949, approximately 80 percent of the population was illiterate.

The poor were at the mercy of the elements in this agricultural society and in periods of floods and droughts they perished by the thousands. They were also frequently put in danger by the warring factions which divided the country.

1949-1965

Following the Japanese invasion of 1931, the Communists' Long March in the mid-1930s, and the final expulsion to Taiwan of the Nationalist Chinese forces, China entered a period of stability with a form of government which emphasized the importance of the common man, a classless society, and the right of each citizen to share in the development of the country. In 1949, the People's Republic of China was formed under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. The people, tired from the harsh Japanese occupation, the civil strife and turmoil, and the appalling injustices, enthusiastically embraced the new Communist government and its reforms.

Rural and factory communes took the place of individual and corporate ownership and a wave of patriotism and comradeship swept over the country. The moral, physical, and intellectual well-being of all citizens was stressed. Family relationships and religious practices were de-emphasized, replaced by loyalty and devotion to Mao and country.

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The over-all result was that improvement in agricultural methods, food distribution practices, factory management techniques, worker output, and national health care slowly brought about the eradication of starvation and below sustenance level existence in PRC.

1966-1976

During the ten year period at the end of Mao's life, there was a national movement against many of the leadership elements in the country, especially the higher institutions of education and religion because of the perception that a new class system was emerging. Teachers, students, scientists, and religious leaders were derided and abused. They were frequently "sent down" to isolated countryside communes for reeducation. Some were even killed.

During this period the school years were shortened in most of the primary and middle schools in the country. Instead of six years at each level, students began to spend only five. Universities were closed and more middle schools with practical curricula were opened.

Post-1976

Following the death of Mao and the expulsion of the "Gang of Four" in 1976, emphasis has again been placed on the moral, physical and intellectual development of the individual. Private enterprise and ownership is permitted on a small scale and stress is again being placed on education and literacy for the masses.

Since 1976 there has been a shift away from the hero worship of the late Chairman Mao towards a more generalized respect for Party leaders. The Soviet Union, previously a strong presence in PRC, was no longer looked upon as a close ally and overtures were made to the Western nations. The "bamboo curtain" was lifted and the Chinese people, isolated from the Western world so long, looked on with utter astonishment and wonder as these "foreign devil" tourists descended upon them.

The money derived from tourism is being used for badly needed housing and road construction, the repair and restoration of religious buildings and artifacts neglected or damaged during the Cultural Revolution, reclamation of land for agricultural use, and, in general, the promotion of the four modernizations of China: agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology.

LANGUAGE

Oral Language

The Chinese speak many dialects, all unified by a common written language. A person speaking one dialect cannot understand other dialects unless they have been taught to him like a foreign language. Mandarin and Cantonese are the best known dialects with Mandarin being spoken by about 75 percent of the people (DeFrancis, 1976). In 1956, Mao declared that Mandarin was to be the national language of PRC and, to facilitate communication, it is now an important part of the curriculum in most schools.

Chinese (Mandarin) is a tonal language with four basic tones: high (–); high rising (/); low (∪); and high falling (\) (DeFrancis, 1976). The tone is very important because a word, such as "ba", has a different meaning and a different written character in each of the four tones:

Table 1

Tonal Changes in Meaning

Pinyin	Translation	Written Character
bā	eight	八
bá	pull out	拔
bǎ	hold	把
bà	dam	坝

Written Language

All Chinese use the same characters except for the Di minority people who historically have had no written language (Wong, 1984). Originally a rhebus language, each Chinese character contains a basic "picture" called a radical or ideogram which is like a root word. Characters also contain phonemes which give clues to the pronunciation. Words can be as simple as a single radical or as complex as three or four characters.

Table 2

The Use of Radicals
In Forming Words

Character	Pinyin	Translation
女	nǚ	woman
安	ān	peace (a woman under a roof)
姦	jiān	adultery (more than one woman)
嫁	jià	to marry (a woman coming to a home)

In 1956 Chairman Mao and his advisors introduced a list of simplified, commonly used characters in order to reduce the complexity of the written language. Since then, more simplified characters have been added. This system has been well accepted on the mainland but is not used in other Chinese speaking countries.

Pinyin

In 1956, Chairman Mao also declared that all Chinese should learn Hanyu Pinyin, a romanized version of written Chinese, to facilitate elementary school education and to ease communication problems with non-Oriental nations. Pinyin was developed within PRC and replaced the Western Wade-Giles system of transliteration.

This system is not used in other Chinese speaking countries but it is widely used in PRC. Chinese children just learning to read are exposed to it daily. When a new character is introduced, the children learn its meaning, its pronunciation, its stroke order, and its Pinyin spelling.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Pre-School and Day Care

Infants and very young children are usually cared for by their mothers due to liberal maternity leave practices throughout China. Because of State inducements for citizens to remain unmarried until their mid-twenties, babies have the advantage of being born

to fully matured parents who have supportive parents themselves. Familial ties are strong and extended families are commonplace in spite of the Communist policies of the earlier years de-emphasizing the family.

After the mothers have returned to work, grandparents and other older relatives may serve as primary caretakers, or the children may be placed in nurseries run by residential committees, communes, factories, or production brigades. In cities, it is estimated that from 50 to 70 percent of the pre-school population is cared for in day care centers with the rest staying with grandparents and other relatives during the parents' working hours (Kerr, 1978). In rural areas the number of babies cared for by relatives is considerably higher.

Emphasis in day care is on meeting the needs of the children while shaping their characters into acceptable and desirable traits. Children are expected to comply with rules and regulations, to respect authority, to cooperate with each other, and to help each other to grow and develop.

Children are the national treasure of China. Families, especially rural families, feel that many children, particularly male children, are needed to ensure care of the elders in old age and to continue the family line. For this reason it has been difficult to institute successful population control. The government has mandated that each family is to have only one child unless the baby is born severely handicapped or dies. Even minority peoples formerly exempt from population control because of past persecution are now being urged to limit themselves to one child per couple (Urumqi Xinjiang Broadcast, 1984).

If parents have a second child, the family is fined and subjected to criticism by local Party officials. In reality, however, the policy has not been as successful as anticipated. China Reconstructs reported that, in 1981, more than half the babies born in China (53.45 percent) had siblings, and that, in rural areas, 40 percent of the babies were third or even fourth children. Still, it is expected that the wide dissemination of contraceptives, the availability of abortions, the economic and social sanctions against more than one child, and the practice of remaining unmarried into the mid-twenties will result in most children being only children within the foreseeable future.

Nursery School/Kindergarten

The philosophy and practices begun in day care and nurseries are continued and expanded in kindergarten. Emphasis is placed on the four basic principles of morality: love of country, service to others, willingness to abide by the group's decisions, and respect for authority (Montaperto, 1979). Towards this end, children are taught

songs and stories with a moral about love and respect of country, sacrifice of self for the good of others, and the brave deeds of the "People's Heroes." Even three year olds are taught to speak appropriately and to show respect for adults.

Education is pragmatic, more concrete and action oriented than abstract and stress is placed on the appreciation of work and service to others. Children are taken on frequent outings to visit factories and communes. They learn how to garden as well as how to recognize the names of the important crops in their area. Through song and dance, they learn to demonstrate knowledge of and enjoyment for work.

At this stage of development, most of the day's activities are geared to large muscle and physical activities. However, most kindergartens also plan quiet listening activities for one or two periods a day to prepare the children for primary school (Kerr, 1978).

Kindergartens usually conform to the parents' working hours so that the children spend most of their waking hours away from their parents. Parents, however, are often able to spend their lunch breaks with their children.

PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

The formal school years are divided into primary (elementary) schools, grades 1-6, middle (junior and senior high) school, grades 7-12, and university level. There is a strong Western influence in Chinese education due in part to the Christian missionary movement, the practice of wealthy families providing a British or American college education for their children, and the presence in China before World War II of the John Dewey progressive education movement.

The goals of primary school education in China are to instill in individuals the values of a classless society and to shift the sense of responsibility and obedience away from the family and to the State and the Party (Montaperto, 1979). There is heavy emphasis on the work ethic and on mutual help in the form of criticism and self-criticism (Kerr, 1978). The highest priority is on political education and the importance of the non-school learning environment.

Structure

The primary school year is usually divided into two school terms, the first from September to January and the second from February to July for a total of about 34 weeks. The school day is normally from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm with a two hour lunch break, and, in general, children attend school six days a week, although other

schedules may be followed. For example, in crowded areas, split or staggered school hours are used, and, in rural areas where the children are needed in the fields, a three term year may be used so that the children will be free of classroom responsibilities during the planting and harvesting seasons of the year.

Primary school attendance is now compulsory. Although some children in isolated areas and the most severely handicapped may not be in school, all others between the ages of 7 and 12 are required to attend.

Primary schools are generally built around a courtyard and are two stories high. Children, 45 to 50 to a class, sit close together at desks or long tables, usually two by two, with three or four aisles running the length of the room. The rooms are each generally equipped with the students' furniture, a teacher's desk, a podium or lectern, and two or three chalkboards. There is usually no central heating even in winter but there is good fluorescent lighting.

There are three types of primary schools: private, voluntary (run by the local People's Council), and government. The government schools are "key" schools and tend to have the best teachers and supplies. All three types are subsidized by the Ministry of Education and must abide by its directives. Parents, except for the extremely poor, pay a fee to the school for textbooks, notebooks, pencils, and other school supplies (Price, 1979).

Organization

Each primary school is run by a principal who is usually chosen from among the most qualified teachers in the school. Each school has a small advisory board but most decisions are made at meetings of the full school staff, including the food service and custodial workers.

Every school tries to employ "master" teachers who are university trained. The pupil-teacher ratio is about 45 or 50 to one. Most of the primary school teachers are women and it is their job to take care of the pupils in every respect: morally, physically, and intellectually. In some schools the teacher remains with her students throughout their primary school experience.

A student leader is elected by each class to be the teacher's special assistant. This student has the responsibility of helping the teacher to maintain discipline, to keep the classroom clean, to arrange class meetings, and to plan activities for the group. The classroom is further organized into study groups of eight to ten students with a leader chosen for each group. Each member of the group is responsible for all the

other members. Intellectually gifted students are expected to help slower students with their studies, and well disciplined members are expected to meet with and to criticize non-conforming students so that they will "mend their ways."

Discipline can range from criticism and self-criticism to expulsion from school in serious cases. Non-conforming children are a source of shame to the family and the child's behavior reflects on the family's honor, causing the family to "lose face" in the community. Non-conforming children are rarely seen anywhere in China.

Curriculum

The curriculum is based on the teachings of Chairman Mao and is determined by the Ministry of Education as is the daily schedule and the yearly time-table. In general, during the first three years of primary school, approximately 50 percent of the school day is devoted to reading and language activities, 25 percent to arithmetic, and 25 percent to physical education, music, and manual arts (Price, 1979). In areas where Mandarin is not the dialect spoken, the language curriculum includes daily instruction in Mandarin (Putonghua), the People's Language. During the last three years of primary school, history, geography, and English are also added to the curriculum.

An important part of every primary school's curriculum is a series of eye and face massages designed to prevent myopia and astigmatism. The exercises, broadcast over a loud-speaker system several times a day, are accompanied by music and are performed diligently.

Methods

Almost all teaching is whole group and very regimented. Repetitive sing-song drills and memorization are key elements in the system. There is little or no room for originality or development of reasoning abilities. The teacher often holds up a flash card containing the character and the Pinyin while the children recite in unison, simultaneously drawing the character in the air and chanting the names of the different strokes used in writing the character. Stroke order is important for the character to "look" right. Many of the characters are learned by chanting them in a prescribed order, one after the other, like our ABCs.

Sometimes the teacher will say a word and all the students will point to it in their books while she goes around the room to check. There is also oral reading, again involving the whole class. All the books are held at the proper angle and the proper distance from the eyes, with all hands positioned in the same manner on the edges of the book. The student reading aloud stands.

The look-say method of teaching reading is relied upon almost exclusively with heavy reliance on rote learning. By the end of the third year of primary school, the student will be able to recognize over 3,000 characters and to reproduce them using the proper stroke order.

Each student is tested on his knowledge twice a year through a series of standardized exams. Students who do not pass are allowed to take the exam again at the end of the next semester. If the exam is failed a second time, the student is expected to repeat the grade. The failure rate is controlled by the State and is expected to remain at less than 5 percent.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Like primary schools, academic middle schools are influenced by the American educational system. Middle school is divided into two three-year levels to correspond to junior and senior high schools. Entrance to middle school is based on a competitive exam and recommendation system, as is entrance to university level study (Kerr, 1978).

Middle school attendance is not compulsory and many students do not attend at all. Quite a large number enter vocational or technical training situations at this time or become part of the work force. Vocational schools are usually part-time, allowing for "on the job" training.

Students who do not continue formal education after primary school may still have the opportunity to study part-time. There are evening middle school classes offered throughout PRC and the State also provides training in academic subjects, such as math and foreign languages, through radio and television instruction.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Introduction

The Chinese recognize the need for special help for children with problems but not the practice of segregating them from the mainstream. Parents of children with special needs feel they would lose face if their children did not attend the regular school and they are unwilling to place them in separate classrooms or facilities. The state also feels that the self-esteem of the children would suffer if they were to be put into special classes.

Therefore, except for profoundly deaf or blind children who are usually educated separately, and for one experimental school of mentally retarded students in Shanghai, there is no separate special education in China. All other children are educated in the regular schools or they are not formally educated at all.

Gifted and Talented

In June 1953, the first Children's Palace was founded in the city of Shanghai by Madame Sun Yat Sen (Soong Ching Ling) for the purpose of providing after-school enrichment activities for children from 6 to 16. This recreational center served as a national model and many other cities have since opened children's palaces as well. Many of the centers were housed in the palatial mansions of the displaced ruling class which is where the name came from (Wang, 1983).

Activities offered include music and dance, orchestra, art, arts and crafts, carpentry, and other hobbies. During school hours the palaces are used for school group instruction. Children are expected to pass on to others the skills they learn, to provide the maximum amount of community involvement.

There are also other more specialized programs for the gifted and talented. For example, in Hangzhou there is an arts school for primary age children who are talented in singing and dancing. The school is noted for light opera. Entrance is by examination and auditions.

Another example of a specialized program is the County Children's Art Studio in Qingtian County, Zhejiang Province. This program was founded in 1980 and includes 30 gifted young artists from ages 4 to 12. The children are encouraged to develop their talent to the maximum and their work is shown all over the country (Zhang, 1983).

CONCLUSION

The post-revolutionary period in China has been one of tremendous industrial and agricultural progress in the face of incredible odds. Although many serious mistakes have been made, especially during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the results of this thirty-five year period have been extremely successful.

Life expectancies have increased dramatically, from age 35 in 1949 to 67 in 1983. The infant mortality rate is lower and the health of the people and their standard of living have been improved. The literacy rate has risen sharply from only 20 percent in 1949 to 70 percent in 1978 (Kerr, 1978).

Elementary school education has been made available to almost every child in China. In addition, the ability of children to take advantage of a formal education has been increased by the greatly improved health services, better nutrition, and better parenting by more mature couples with fewer children.

The communication problems engendered by the presence of so many dialects have been eased by the introduction of a national language. The reading difficulties of memorizing complex characters and the cumbersomeness of learning to write them have been alleviated by the implementation of a system of simplified characters. Learning to read and write is now within the reach of almost every Chinese citizen.

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